



The Mazurian Question in the Past and Today: A Commentary to W. Pohorecki's Article "Mazurzy w Prusach Wschodnich" [Mazurians in East Prussia] (1932)

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Abstract

This paper is a commentary to W. Pohorecki's article devoted to Mazurians in East Prussia, published in 1932. The comments focus on information which is still of interest today (data on the status of Mazurians in the interwar period, identity issues), and identify issues which are rather of historical interest (the state of education, Germanization in various spheres of life).

Keywords: Mazuria; East Prussia; identity; ethnic minority

In recent years, there has been no shortage of debate in Poland about population groups suspended between different nations. There are more or less substantive disputes about the identity of Silesians, Mazurians, and Kashubians, and about their

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place in the landscape of Polishness and Germanness. This can be seen not only in academic discourse, but also, for example, in literary non-fiction. Suffice it to mention, on the one hand, publications of researchers – dozens of historians, sociologists and representatives of various other fields (cf. e.g. Kossert, 2001a, 2001b, 2009, 2014; Marcinkiewicz, 2015; Orłowski & Żytyniec, 2019; Pasierb, 1989; Poniedziałek, 2014; Sakson, 2017; Traba, 2005) – and, on the other hand, collections of reportages and essays about the inhabitants of Upper Silesia (Rokita, 2020), Mazuria (Mierzwa, 2019; Szady, 2020), and Kashubia (Słomczyński, 2021).

Mazurians are a specific community among these groups – they remained on the periphery, far away from the linguistic and political center, and they were a borderland community (cf. Sakson, 1990). It is not surprising, then, that the Mazurian question appeared also in texts published in the interwar period, when the multi-ethnic state was only emerging, and when only a part of the territory inhabited by this ethnos belonged to Poland.

Pohorecki's article was published over a decade after Poland lost the East Prussian plebiscite (1920), and in the year of parliamentary elections in the Weimar Republic, when the NSDAP gained a significant advantage over other parties.¹

In his relatively short text, Pohorecki writes on a number of issues, and commenting on all of them would actually require a book-length study. Therefore, I will only take a rather brief look at some of them, considering their relevance today or, conversely, their obsolescence (stemming from several factors).

The author refers to the state of affairs which is entirely different from the situation today. After the Second World War, as we know, a fundamental change took place – Prussian Mazovia became part of the People's Republic of Poland, and the indigenous inhabitants of the region were mostly displaced or, practically having no choice, decided to leave their homes. The small number of Mazurians who remained there after 1945 had to prove their Polishness and renounce any ties with Germany and Germanness.

At this point, what should be noted is a change in the name of the region. Pohorecki writes as follows:

The actual topic of this article is *Prussian Mazovia* (*Mazowsze Pruskie*), i.e. that ethnographically Polish part of East Prussia which used to be part of Ducal Prussia, and thus never belonged directly to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. (Pohorecki, 1932, p. 167; emphasis original)

This area – referred to in Polish literature from the second half of the nineteenth century until the mid-1940s as Prussian Mazovia (*Mazowsze Pruskie*; cf. e.g. Botwiński, 1898; Grabowski, 1935; Limanowski, 1925; Uziembło, 1920) or Prussian Mazuria (*Mazury Pruskie*; cf. Sempołowska, 1913) – is present-day Mazuria, part of the administrative region of

¹ In this commentary I do not consider issues concerning the activities of the NSDAP in East Prussia (cf. e.g. Koziętko-Poklewski, 1995).

Warmia-Mazuria. Just after the Second World War, another name was introduced: Mazovian Pomerania (Pomorze Mazowieckie).²

The question of the name of the region is closely related to the language issue. Pohorecki comments in detail on statistics presented by German officials, which indicate a mass-scale decline in the Mazurian population. He shows the mechanisms of data manipulation on the German part, such as a distinction being made between Polish and Mazurian as mother tongue. The author aptly points out that the term "Mazurian language" should not be used at all, and that "Mazurian dialect" is the actual term. Classifying the Polish language as two languages blurs the real picture. This issue was also raised by Edward Romer in his work (published several years before) on statistics from the Prussian censuses – the question about mother tongue (*muttersprache*) listed, among others, Polish (*polnisch*) and Mazurian (*masurisch*) (Romer, 1919, p. 4). In his opinion, "it was arbitrary and groundless to introduce the concept of Mazurians in the census of population"; after all, he notes, it does not apply to the inhabitants of the region of Warmia and the Chełmno and Ostróda regions (Romer, 1919, p. 10). On the other hand, one cannot overlook that in this journalistic work with a touch of propaganda, Romer intentionally overestimated the population of Polish speakers.

Later researchers point to the issue of language as a source of conflicts and divisions in ethnically heterogeneous East Prussia already in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (see e.g. Bömelburg, 2019, p. 275; Gerlach, 1959). At the same time, however, what needs to be taken into account is communication needs – German gave greater opportunities for social advancement and enabled its speakers to function in a wider social and cultural space. In the nineteenth century and later, it was a "utilitarian language of communication" (Bömelburg, 2019, p. 284). It was German that opened a way to social advancement for Mazurians.

At this point, it is enough to mention a short poem from the period: "Względna rada" [A Good Piece of Advice] by Jan Marczówka, a teacher, in which he writes: "Learn German, my friend, / you will be a good fellow, / You will be fit for things, you know" (*Ucz się bracie po niemiecku, / będziesz dobrym chłopem, / Będziesz zdatnym, kochaneczku*) (Marczówka, 1844, p. 1). An emotional reply from Gustaw Gizewiusz was entitled as follows: "A Reply to Mr. J. Marczówka, who cares for spreading German dung on Mazurian soil, so that German wheat can grow on Mazurian, Polish sands quickly" (Gizewiusz, 1844, p. 2); it was published in a supplement to the magazine *Przyjaciel Ludu Łecki* [The Łék Friend of the People]. The clash between the tendency to use German and the defense of Polish was visible particularly in the nineteenth century. One interesting example is that the *Przyjaciel Ludu Łecki* rejected an article submitted for publication by Marcin Giersz, in which he recommended learning German (J. Jasiński, 1962, p. 584).

In his article, Pohorecki, following the linguist Kazimierz Nitsch, presents the boundaries of Mazurian local dialects, which at the same time mark the geographical extent of

2 For a detailed, comprehensive discussion of changes in the name of present-day Mazuria from the sixteenth century until today, see J. Jasiński, 2003.

the Mazurian population. These boundaries (with slight deviations) were still the case in the 1950s, as confirmed by Witold Doroszewski and his research team, who conducted comprehensive field studies on those dialects at the time.³

In a sense, the use of Mazurian dialect was associated with a religious movement which developed in the nineteenth century – Pohorecki mentions the Fellowship Movement (*gromadkarze*) (Pohorecki, 1932, pp. 181–183), which played an important role in the preservation of Polish in East Prussia. It is also mentioned in some replies to Georg Wenker's questionnaire for the *Deutscher Sprachatlas* [German Linguistic Atlas] that were recorded in Polish (Rembiszewska, 2021, pp. 36–37). The Fellowship Movement, which had a considerable impact on the spiritual life of Mazurians, was to some extent described already in the 1930s and shortly after the Second World War (Leyk, 1937; Sukertowa-Biedrawina, 1950). It came to be studied in more detail in the 1970s by Ryszard Otello (Otello, 1976/1997, 2003), who refers to Pohorecki's article under discussion here.

On the other hand, the content of Pohorecki's article is a perfect illustration of how topics discussed may become irrelevant as a result of political changes, shifting borders, and a new order introduced as a result of war. For example, as it is today, his information about the functioning of schools only has the value of a historical record (Pohorecki, 1932, p. 183). Another issue which has no relevance today is the Germanization measures against the Mazurian population, covered in the sections devoted to German organizations and the press,⁴ including the magazine *Cech* (Pohorecki, 1932, pp. 183–186).⁵ The magazine was a platform for separatist ideas, advocated, among others, by Kurt Obitz,⁶ who saw Mazurians as a separate nation which, although Polish-speaking, was distinct from Poles. Obitz, who always said that he was Mazurian,⁷ stressed that *Cech* "aimed to educate

3 The results of research on Mazurian and Warmian dialects were published, among others, in the series *Studia Warmińsko-Mazurskie* [Warmia and Mazuria Studies].

4 There are several studies devoted to the regional press in Mazuria, including the Polish magazines (e.g. Cieślak, 1964; Szostakowska, 2007).

5 The magazine *Cech* was published in 1928–1933 (mainly in German); its motto was: "Our speech, keep it" and "Our faith, keep it" (*Gwara nasa, trzymajcie się; Wiara nasa, trzymajcie się*).

6 Kurt Obitz (1907–1945) – veterinarian, parasitologist, activist of the *Masurenbund* (Union of Mazurians). Due to his activities for the cause of Mazurians, he had to leave Berlin, where he worked after his graduation from university. He then worked for the Department of Parasitology, University of Warsaw, and from 1935 – the Department of Parasitology and Invasive Diseases at the Faculty of Veterinary, National Institute for Agricultural Research in Puławy. He started to learn Polish only after his arrival in Poland (Wadowski, 1962). In the 1930s, he was active in the Mazurian Committee for Cultural Care of Compatriots (Mazurski Komitet Opieki Kulturalnej nad Rodakami) and the Union of Mazurians (Związek Mazurów) in Działdowo. During the Second World War, he was imprisoned in the Dachau concentration camp. Obitz left behind the manuscript *Dzieje ludu mazurskiego* [A History of the Mazurian People], which was a Mazurian manifesto; it was not published until 2007 (Obitz, 2007). In an extensive introduction to Obitz's *Dzieje*, Grzegorz Jasiński refers to Pohorecki's article discussed in the present commentary; on both occasions, he writes about W. Podhorecki, and not Pohorecki.

7 In an exhibition devoted to Kurt Obitz, there was a quotation from him which illustrates the identity entanglement of Mazurians: "I am often asked, officially and in private, who I am, after all, German or Polish. I always say: I am Mazurian". The exhibition was held at the History Meeting House (Dom Spotkań z Historią) in Warsaw in 2010; it was organized by the Museum of Folk Culture in Węgorzewo, the Borussia Cultural Community Association and the History Meeting House.

Mazurians to be aware of the honor and fame of their own people" (Obitz, 2007, p. 99). The magazine gained particular popularity when Obitz, the editor-in-chief, had to leave Berlin and settled in Poland. Writing about it today, one of the researchers in this field observes as follows:

It was more than a magazine: it was a kind of primer, a textbook informing about law, democracy, social issues, and even national minorities, of course mainly in terms of the rights of the Mazurian population. (G. Jasiński, 2007, p. 16)

Another issue which is only of historical interest today is the position of Mazurians in the social structure of the region, about which Pohorecki writes:

Mazurians are small farmers, owners of mostly dwarf farms – although the area is sometimes seemingly large, the land is poor and families are big. [...] They also occupy the lowest positions in administration and police [...]. The working and exploited element are the Mazurians. (Pohorecki, 1932, p. 177)

There have also been significant changes when it comes to the size of the Mazurian population. In 1932, Pohorecki wrote about "240,000 Mazurians of Polish origin, speaking Polish, living in a compact mass in 11 districts" (Pohorecki, 1932, p. 139). On the other hand, the latest available statistics quoted today in *Encyklopedia Warmii i Mazur* [Encyclopedia of Warmia and Mazuria] are as follows:

In the 2011 census, Mazurian identification was declared by 1,376 people, including 1,125 of those who declared it as the second one; 1,027 people declared it along with Polish identification. Out of these, 932 lived in urban centres, and 445 – in rural areas. ("Mazurzy", n.d.; the numbers do not add up as in the original)

Of course, answers to census questions do not give a full picture.⁸ However, there is certainly no doubt that the Mazurian population has decreased drastically in recent decades.⁹ Statistics might look different when the results of the 2021 census are made available.

The future of the discussed ethnos does not look optimistic, a fact already stressed by Pohorecki. Indeed, a recently published collection of articles by the historian Janusz Małtek has a significant title: *Zanik ludu mazurskiego*, that is, "the disappearance of the Mazurian people", which is also the title of one of the articles (Małtek, 2020).¹⁰ Although in recent years attempts have been made to reactivate Mazurian commu-

8 The results of the 2021 census have not yet been published. This census may record an increase in the number of people declaring their Mazurian identification, which is related to the activity of various organizations for the dissemination of knowledge about Mazurians and their identity, e.g. the Mazurian Union Association (Stowarzyszenie Związek Mazurski) in Szczytno (cf. e.g. Machnowska & Arbatowski, 2021).

9 On a side note, it is worth mentioning that a 1960 article on current demographic issues in the administrative province of Olsztyn refers to "the native Polish population" rather than Mazurians (Wrzesiński, 1960, p. 188).

10 In this article, Małtek identifies four periods of decline of the Mazurian people: "(1) 1945–1956: Verification, re-Polonization; (2) 1956–1970: Family reunification; (3) 1970–1989: The last phase of emigration to West Germany; (4) 1989–2019: German minority. Epilogue" (Małtek, 2020, p. 121).

nities and revive their speech,¹¹ it is rather difficult to speak of a full-scale revival of Mazurianness.

The final paragraph of Pohorecki's article sounds almost prophetic today:

One hundred years passed, the state border of East Prussia was a permanent line. For a hundred years, the Polish nation, occupied with the fight against the partitioning powers, did not have time to deal with the Mazurian question. The Russians effectively inhibited our viability in the Congress Kingdom. The Mazurian question practically did not exist in Greater Poland. It was a period of favorable conditions for the Germans. It is over now. The situation keeps changing to their disadvantage ever faster. (Pohorecki, 1932, p. 195)

Summing up, it can be said that W. Pohorecki's article has informational value also today. It contains a lot of important data on Mazurians (at a specific historical point: the 1930s) based on German statistics. Due to the geopolitical and socio-political changes that took place after the Second World War, we can now look at his article as an interesting historical document, whose relevance today is rather limited. However, this does not change the fact that it has a cognitive value and it offers a multi-dimensional view of the Mazurian question, which is still subject to polemics and comments, most often in the political context.

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11 One of the revivalists of Mazurian speech is Piotr Szatkowski – the author of the Mazurian primer and a translation of *The Little Prince* into Mazurian. He also runs a Facebook page called *Mazurskie słówko na dziś* [Mazurian Word for Today] (*Mazurskie słówko na dziś*, n.d.; <https://www.facebook.com/po.mazursku>). At the same time, it needs to be noted that he deals with the revitalization of the dialect rather than linguistic research. His research activity focuses on sociological issues, with language issues in the background.

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Kwestia mazurska dawniej i dziś – komentarz do artykułu W. Pohoreckiego, *Mazurzy w Prusach Wschodnich* (1932)

Abstrakt

Artykuł jest komentarzem do artykułu W. Pohoreckiego poświęconego Mazurom w Prusach Wschodnich, opublikowanego w 1932 roku. W tekście wskazano na informacje, które do dziś nie straciły na aktualności (dane dotyczące statusu Mazurów w dwudziestoleciu międzywojennym, zagadnienia tożsamościowe) oraz te zdezaktualizowane (stan oświaty, germanizacja w różnych sferach życia).

Słowa kluczowe: Mazury; Prusy Wschodnie; tożsamość; mniejszość etniczna

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